THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH): (a) The number of applications pending for issue of passports with Passport Office, Hyderabad as on 31.3.1999 is 30,018.

(b) Approximately 200 persons visit Passport Office, Hyderabad every day to follow up on their applications.

(c) and (d) The measures taken to expedite processing of passport applications include computerisation of processing procedures; provision of a tele-enquiry system; enhancing the validity of passports to 20 years; provision for dispatch of passports by speed post and issue of passport on an over-due basis where police reports are not received during the prescribed time limit of four weeks.

India's relations with Taiwan

2699. SHRI RAJNATH SINGH 'SURYA': Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) what is our policy on relations with Taiwan:

(b) are there any Indians detained in Taiwan;

(c) if so, how many of them and on what grounds;

(d) whether it is a fact that any person has been detained in connection with a ship accident near Taiwanese coast; and

(e) if so, what action has Government taken so far to getting the release expedited?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH): (a) Government of India do not maintain any official or diplomatic relations with the "Republic of China". Government facilitates non-official economic, trade and cultural links to enhance trade, tourism and investment.

(b) and (c) According to the information available, ten Indian nationals are presently detained in Taiwan on various charges.

(d) Two Indian seamen, namely, Captain Raj Kumar Goel and Shri Yoganarasimha Dodla are facing trial in a court of law in connection with a collision of their ship. MV Kasuga-I, registered in Panama and being managed by Univan Ship Management Limited. Hong Kong, with a Taiwanese fishing boat on 5 February 1996 about 17 nautical miles off the coast of Taiwan, in which only one of the twenty nine crew members on the fishing vessel was reported to have survived. The two seamen are now free on bail though they cannot leave Taiwan until the court proceedings are settled.

(e) Through the good offices of the India-Taipei Association in Taipei (ITA), contact was maintained with the Captain and other crew members of MV Kasuga-I throughout the period of their detention and the court proceedings. The Director General of the India-Taipei Association office in Taipei as also other representatives of that office attended the court proceedings in person and otherwise rendered necessary assistance to the Indian crew members. ITA officials met and made appropriate representations to the concerned authorities in Taiwan. Messrs Univan Ship Management Company were in direct touch with the Directorate General of Shipping, Ministry of Surface Transport, Government of India in regard to the substantive aspects of the case since this is the subject matter of the Directorate General of Shipping.

Immediately after the details of the accident became known, the Government submitted an affidavit claiming jurisdiction in the case in accordance with Article 97 of the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982. This submission was not accepted. Another affidavit was then submitted on behalf of the Directorate General of Shipping by ITA in Taiwanese High Court further clarifying the issues involved.

A delegation of six Members of Parliament, led by Hon'ble Member of Parliament, Shri P. Upendra met Taiwanese authorities and raised the issue of detention of these two seamen during their recent visit to Taiwan. They are assured of positive help.

Linking of Indian Missions with Wireless System

2700. SHRI BHAGABAN MAJHI: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have a proposal to link all the Indian Missions with modern wireless system?

(b) if so, how many Missions are likely to be connected with modern wireless system during 1999-2000; and

(c) by which year every Indian Mission abroad would be provided with such facility?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH): (a) and (b) No Sir. However, the Ministry has implemented to project called High Frequency Radio Communication (HFRC) network with 22 Indian Missions abroad. This is intended for emergency communication purposes when the normal channels of communications are disrupted. It is not proposed to cover any additional Missions with this wireless system.

In addition, all Indian Missions and Posts are linked with headquarters and to each other by telephone, fax and telex and in most cases also by electronic mail.

(c) Does not arise.

Issues discussed in the SAARC conference

2701. SHRI SATISH CHANDRA SITARAM PRADHAN:
SHRI BHAGABAN MAJHI:

Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether various issues were discussed in the last SAARC Conference;

(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) whether Indo-Pak agreement has been made on preparing of a time-bound road map; and

(d) what other issues concerning Indo-Pak bilateral relation were discussed in the last SAARC Conference?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH): (a) and (b) The 21st Session of the SAARC Council of Ministers was held in Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka from 18 to 19 March, 1999. This was preceded by the meeting of the SAARC Standing Committee at the official level from 15 to 17 March, 1999. The Council reviewed the progress made in implementing the decisions of the Tenth SAARC Summit held in Colombo in July 1998 with a special focus on regional economic cooperation.

The Ministers approved a modification in the SAPTA Rules of Origin which would reduce the minimum Domestic Content requirement by 10%. They noted with appreciation that the Third Round of SAPTA had been concluded and that the Fourth Round of SAPTA negotiations was to commence in July 1999. They also noted that the Group of Experts had been set up to commence negotiations on a SAFTA Treaty and emphasised the importance of having the Treaty in place by the year 2001.

The Council agreed that the SAARC countries should work closely with a view to identifying issues of common concern and seeking a convergence in strategies well in advance of the forthcoming Third WTO Conference.

The Council also discussed the proposal for a SAARC Social Charter and agreed to constitute an Inter-Governmental Group to proceed with work on the Charter.

The Council approved an expansion of the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme to several new categories to facilitate contacts amongst the business community and cultural and educational institutions.